

File: Phoenix

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CHARGES PHOENIX JAILS OPPONENTS OF THIEU

JOSEPH BENTI: There's a report from the Reuters News Agency this morning that copies of the mass circulation newspaper Tien Sang, the morning news, was seized by the Saigon government authorities after an editorial charged that democracy no longer exists in South Viet Nam and that President Thieu had lost the support of the Vietnamese people. The paper had resumed publication just yesterday after having been shut down a month by the government for criticizing the United States military, for defoliating in Viet Nam, and the government's austerity tax program.

To Alfred Hassler, executive secretary of the pacifist organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, this action today simply is another verification of his charge that the Thieu-Ky government in Saigon, with the willing assistance of the United States, is fighting a secret war against the South Vietnamese people, those whom the United States has said it wants to help achieve freedom and a democratic system.

The charges are contained in this book, which is being released today, Saigon-USA. Mr. Hassler, this new piece of evidence, as we noted, the newspaper being closed, is just another in a series of things which you document in your book. Why is the United States involved in Viet Nam in a way which apparently is counter to what it is we said we were in there for?

ALFRED HASSLER: Yes, well, I suppose it comes, grows out of the excessive anti-communism which has determined our foreign policy for all these years, but I was thinking as you talked about Tien Sang that this is the 28th newspaper that has been closed by the Saigon government within the past year and a half. The Saigon government not only controls the right to suspend publication, but it controls all of the newsprint which the newspapers need to carry on, so they are under a constant form of censorship by the Saigon government.

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BENTI: There are many other incidents, and as has been said by some of those who read this book before it was published, you quietly and consistently document incidents where the Saigon government, the Thieu-Ky government, does not fulfill its obligations, not only to the concept of democracy--this is your charge, now, but really counter to the interests, you say, of the Vietnamese people.

HASSLER: There is no doubt in my mind at all that not is the Thieu-Ky government not a democratic government--it's far from that--it is as tyrannical and authoritarian as any government in the world today, but it is an assurance, so long as it remains in power, that the war will not end. The health, the very existence of the Thieu-Ky government depends upon the war. It's kept in power by the United States as an instrument for carrying on the war. The moment that the United States withdraws its support or withdraws its troops, the present Saigon government will collapse--

BENTI: Why?

HASSLER: Because it has no support among the people.

BENTI: But it won an election.

HASSLER: It won an election, a rigged election. That's documented in the book. It got 34½ per cent of the vote, even with a rigged election. It removed from the ballot the two men most likely to win, General Duong Van Minh, who was the general who upset President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, and Mr. (O. Truong Than?), who is a cabinet minister and a very highly respected economist.

BENTI: Now, is this General Big Minh?

HASSLER: That's right, Big Minh, and he is emerging recently; he returned from exile in Thailand recently.

BENTI: If your charges are true, and again, I'm referring to reports I've heard in the past few days that Big Minh--I guess that's an easy way to remember him; it's certainly not too complimentary to call him that, though--Big Minh is re-emerging now as a political force. Why isn't he arrested if he's a threat?

HASSLER: He's too popular. This is the big thing. He's called Big Minh, incidentally, because he's six feet tall. For a Vietnamese, that's big. He's too popular. The people love him; he's the man who did upset the tyrant Diem, and they can't arrest him. He called recently about two months ago, he called a garden party--he had a garden party and called together all of the generals

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who had helped him upset Diem, and it was interesting that he invited General Thieu, General Ky and General Kiem, who are the president, vice president and premier respectively, but invited them as generals, not as president, vice president and premier.

BENTI: You talked about political prisoners. You cite incidents of torture and degradation that are inflicted upon people who are arrested. Yet I am sure there are Americans--who rely on the press in this country--who say that that comes as a result of war. You can't have people running around saying let's surrender, if you're trying to fight a war on the battlefield. You can't have anti-government forces operating freely; in fact a real democracy cannot work in wartime conditions. Is there political persecution of that sort? Is there torture?

HASSLER: There's political persecution and there is torture, which I think I documented, which our study teams, went over in June documented in detail. This is not, again, people who wish to surrender. You see, this is a middle group, a kind of neutralist democratic socialist group--

BENTI: You call it a third force. They don't really call it a third force, because they are afraid that to do so makes it sound as though they are opposing this force against the other two. They really refer to it as a group who want a third solution, a different way out, you see. What they maintain is that the war will not end except you find some kind of middle solution here.

I was thinking as the report came in (EARLIER ON THE PROGRAM) on OPERATION PHOENIX, that our men in Operation Phoenix and the South Vietnamese, are not only rounding up Viet Cong and draft dodgers and deserters, they are also rousing up, in large numbers, political dissenters from the Thieu regime, and these are perfectly loyal South Vietnamese people. They are not Viet Cong; they are thrown in prison. There are roughly 200,000 political prisoners today, at least half of whom have never been tried, and many of them have never had charges leveled against them.

It's Operation Phoenix that is one of the things which is rounding them up and putting them in these places.

BENTI: What is this; we're there, supposedly to help the Vietnamese people? We have 50 seconds left... What is this doing to the structure or the fiber of these people; if peace ever comes, what do we leave behind us?

HASSLER: I was talking with a young Vietnamese woman yesterday who escaped. She was leader of the peace movement there and

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with tears streaming down her cheeks, she was saying, it is destroying the very fiber of the people. She was talking of the fact that so many young Vietnamese women have to turn to prostitution in order to support their families. A Vietnamese laborer today can earn \$20 a month; a prostitute can earn \$25 a day. She said all our human values are being destroyed. Not only the country, not only the people, but the very values that make a society and that hold it together are being destroyed. This is what we're doing.

BENTI: Thank you very much